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ABSTRACT

Epistemic rhetoric, as a monolithic view of language use, will not be much help in forging a useful and consistent definition of the composing process and an accompanying effective pedagogy. By rejecting the mimetic functions of language--and thereby the validity of any empiricism and its derivative, positivism--epistemic rhetoric banishes items thought to be inimical to the "free play" in the composing act. One way to alleviate some of the confusion and posturing associated with rhetorical epistemology is to recognize that rhetoric operates epistemologically in more than one way. The radical epistemic view cannot provide a consistent basis for conceptualizing and critiquing what counts as human knowledge. A view that recognizes rhetoric as not only taxonomic (providing names for concepts, the slots and structures and patterns of discourse) and managerial (assisting the communicator in adapting discourse to its ends and to its audience), but also epistemic (involving the writer in providing the framework that gives the world meaning and purpose) and heuristic (allowing the writer to check models of the world against reality) offers the possibility of articulating what it is that writers do when they write. (HOD)

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Rhetoric as Taxonomic, Managerial, Epistemic, and Heuristic: What We're Really Teaching When We're Teaching Rhetoric and Composition

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Though it is widely proclaimed that a new paradigm for teaching composition has emerged, it is not at all clear that any consensus is forming about how language works, how and why people compose, whether writers can discover or utter truth, and whether such an endeavor, even if possible, is desirable. The conclusion of Braddock and company, circa 1963, rings just as true today as it did then: composition research is at this time comparable to "chemical research as it emerged from the period of alchemy: some terms are being defined usefully, a number of procedures are being refined, but the field as a whole is laced with dreams, prejudices and makeshift operations" (Braddock, et al., 5). Our well-known and well-worn "process" orientation in composition pedagogy--born in the 1970's and fueled by an aggressive program of empirical research through the mid-1980's--suffers from an identity crisis. What "counts" as a process

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methodology in textbooks and classrooms varies from observer to observer. If anything is clear, it is that we are no better at defining the composing process and the place of rhetoric within it than we were before the "revolution."

At the risk of being both anachronistic and obscurantist, I offer the judgment that epistemic rhetoric, as a monolithic view of language use, will not be much help in forging a useful and consistent definition of the composing process and an accompanying effective pedagogy. Like all absolutist doctrines, epistemic rhetoric is unfalsifiable; when one is told that all possible conceptions of reality are inevitably compromised by value-laden, ideological language, or determined by the normative cultural community in which one is situated, one feels sheepish asking, But how do you know that?"[1]

It is not fashionable these days to champion the cause of objectivity or a reality that is really there even when we, in our sovereign discourse communities, are not looking. But one must remark upon how amazing it is to come to an affair like this, amidst learned people who know and love language, and hear it said that despite our collective mental accuity and earnest desire for truth, we cannot but speak what we are conditioned to speak, that we cannot discover what is real, what is "outside of us," since there is no outside of us, our texts, or the world, for us. It is

not clear, given what we hear from epistemic rhetoricians, whether we are helping students gain power by facilitating their literacy, or whether we are merely enslaving them to a military-technopower that rewards pedestrian concerns for clarity, economy, and grace. The growing orthodoxy views literacy not as a liberating, self-actualizing acquisition, but an instrument of oppression, a tool of a technoelite primed to enslave impressionable adolescents to advanced capitalism.

But then, absolutist doctrines are not new to the profession, of course; in the fifteen years since Janet Emig's landmark study of twelfth-graders' composing strategies, there have been concerted efforts to rid the classroom of the alchemy of the dreaded current-traditional rhetoric and its New Critical precepts. The Old Alchemy was a mimetic, logic-oriented search for competence in the product; as such it spoke highly of clarity, unity, and economy, and revered Strunk and White. The New Alchemy turns inward, searching for competence within the writer's consciousness or interpretive community; as such it speaks highly of the uses of obscurity and reveres poststructuralists.

Michael Halloran effectively captures the ambivalence toward literacy among the epistemic rhetoricians and their despair over the possibility of conversing with the world:

> The assumptions about knowledge and the world that informed classical rhetoric are no longer tenable. External reality is paradoxical; our very effort to know something of the physical environment alters that which we seek to know so that object-as-known is not the same as the object we set out to know. . . . It is no longer valid to assume that speaker and audience live in the same world and to study the techniques by which the speaker moves the audience to act or think in a particular way. (624-25)

(I would sumbit that if any of us really believed this extravagant formulation, we would file out of this room right now, ending the charade that we are making meaning or understanding each other.)

Yet one can understand the appeal of any absolutist doctrine, since it tends to relieve individuals of both accountability and responsibility in intriguing ways. By rejecting the mimetic functions of language--and thereby the validity of any empiricism and its derivative, positivism--epistemic rhetoric banishes items thought to be inimical to the "free play" in the composing act.[2] By remystifying the composing act, freeing it from the constraints of objective reality and inquiry by the scientific method, it is hoped that intolerance, unfairness, and general dogmatism would vanish from society.

In fact, I would argue that an epistemic paradigm not only does not shield humankind from intolerance, unfairness and dogmatism, it helps to increase them and that specifically by undermining the ontological status of knowledge and belief. Epistemic rhetoricians cannot make a convincing account of how it is that one breaks out of his cultural conditioning to recognize it as such, naming it, and rejecting it. Though all of us have had the experience of changing our beliefs, consciously or unconsciously, epistemic rhetoricans can offer no convincing account of how anyone comes to believe anything other than what they are reared in, conditioned by, conformed to. To even counter such an accusation, the epistemic rhetorician betrays his reliance on an outside-of-him standard of logic or truth, a logic or truth which impinges and which cannot be successfully resisted--except by the consistent solipsist. (Turning Barry Brummett on his head, I suggest, if the epistemic rhetoricians are correct, one could never know it.)

There is a modest way to alleviate some of the confusion and posturing associated with rhetorical epistemology and that is to recognize that rhetoric operates epistemologically in more than one way. In the remainder of this paper I would like to identify four classifications of rhetorical function in the classroom. Rhetoric, I will

suggest, functions taxonomically, managerially, epistemically, and heuristically in human discourse. In order to set these functions in sharpest relief, I must offer an overview of language, textuality, and human discourse. I am indebted to the work of Walter Ong for much of what follows.

Language, though it is only one way of knowing and expressing what is known, ultimately makes sentience possible, makes the self knowable in terms explicit to itself and to others; it is the means by which consciousness discerns and negotiates perception. The evolution of writing, that is, of textuality, in the human community has made possible what Walter Ong terms a new "noetic," that is, a new way of gaining, perceiving, and representing knowledge. With the advent of textuality, we can come to know ourselves not only through interior dialogue and when we hear ourselves utter things, but also when we see our ideas re-presented in visual symbols. Rhetoric as taxonomic provides the names for concepts, the slots and structures and patterns of discourse, the models for shaping, controlling, articulating what the knower knows in human language.

Textuality thus allows, invites inquiry, distance, an analytical turn of mind which ferrets out, taxonomizes meaning. Writing, in an even more dramatic way than speech,

has permitted the transcendence of self, for the detachment of knowledge from personal memory into texts which permit the writer to become a third person to himself. Reading thus becomes a rhetorical activity which permits both self-reflection and self-transcendence, permitting an encounter with another self or mind in absence of the original author. Because of the distances texts create, however, reading a text is not unlike learning to know another person in all her complexity and ambiguity. Rhetoric as managerial assists the communicator in adapting discourse to its ends and to its audience, offering stylistic options, modes of audience analysis, a means for expressing knowledge discovered by other kinds of inquiry.

Reading a text, like coming to know a person, is thus necessarily replete with experiences of ambiguity, contradiction, incongruity; as Ong suggests, interpreting a text always means inserting it somehow into the ongoing conversations one lives with and coming to understand it as best as one can, given one's experience of the world and the world of ideas. There are both synchronic and diachronic problems with reading such that texts can never be fully explicit; but then neither are human beings. As Michael Polanyi reminds, we know more than we can tell. Ong's explanation is quite similar: "[Humans] are much simpler than anything we can devise to represent them. No matter how much I explain everything I know, including myself, you

still cannot discover what it feels like to be me. I am simpler and clearer to myself than any explanation. Explanation only muddies the waters" (183). Rhetoric as epistemic involves the writer in making manifest in words her model of the world, creating fictions and forming plots which divulge the frameworks which give that world and her relationships in it meaning and purpose. Rhetoric as heuristic allows the writer recognize her models of the world as such, allows her to discover her world as a world, to articulate it, stand beside it, and evaluate it, checking it against the reality that impinges upon her daily, one that cannot be wished away.

Epistemic rhetoricians, in my view, conflate the depth and complexity of personhood with an exaggerated and radically autonomous conception of the individual human consciousness. We are led to believe that each indiviudal's (or cultural community's) experience of the world is so utterly unique that cross-gender or cross-cultural communication in discourse is fatally undermined. The popularity of paradigmaticists such as Thomas Kuhn and the currency of Whorfian myths about the incommensurability of human thought systems, have preempted our trust in our ability to discover what is truly true about the world. Epistemic rhetoric encourages the margins of experience and knowledge to become the nucleus.

The quadruple functions of rhetoric which I have hinted at suggest that the purpose of communicating in speech and in texts is to permit the self to transcend itself and to engage other minds in the pursuit of truth. Rhetoric works to unfold the world or text before me, to help me resist rather than embrace the imposition of my model of the world upon it, to help me escape, in C. S. Lewis's words, "incessant autobiography." While I can never fully escape the imprint of my language, my times, my gender, and my cultural heritage upon my perception, rhetorical inquiry assists me in stripping away falsehoods and pointing me in the direction of truth and knowledge.

As I close, let me ask you to entertain this scenario, however ludicrous: pretend that naive realists and objectivists are right. We can confront reality directly; the names for things do serve us well in pointing to real objects which exist independently of our perception and cultural consensus. Consider the possibility that we have all been victims of the Big Lie. That wishing doesn't make it so. What difference would this make in the way informed, sensitive teachers of writing teach literacy skills? None, I would suspect, because all of us tend to be much better than our epistemologies. Whether "for argument's sake" we follow Foucault or Derrida or Ong or Cherwitz, all of us operate under the assumption that understanding is possible, that we and others can come to change our minds about

things, and that truth is a laudable goal--even if it is ultimately unattainable in any but the most finite form.

Against the radical epistemic platform, I would offer one based on a more comprehensive view of rhetorical function in discourse. Such a view acknowledges the problematic, contingent nature of reality and the impact of inquiries into its nature. At the same time it posits a reality which is preexistent and independent of our observation of it. One must carefully distinguish between the naive objectivism of the old and new alchemies (which are rightfully rejected) and a mitigated objectivism which has truth as its goal while it denies the claim to know truth self-evidently. As Gene Blocker argues, "it is the concept of objective reality that enables us to acknowledge the 'limitations' of the human standpoint to complete reproduce the world in thought and deed" (236). We recognize our constructs of reality as constructs by making reference to an objective reality which our constructs fail to capture. One may thus criticize the doctrine of objectivism without surrending a notion of objective reality. One may concede the finiteness of man's perspective but maintain truth as his goal; I don't have to know everything to know something. "The continuous quest for truth provides the basis for a sustained challenge to self-congratulatory claims for absolute knowledge" (Orr 267-69).

Poverty is real. Hunger is real. Death is real. No brand of epistemological gymnastics can legislate away the real problems that human beings confront on this planet. We cheapen human life in the most cyncial way when we try to escape responsibility for human action by entertaining spurious claims of epistemology. The radical epistemic view cannot provide a consistent basis for conceptualizing and critiquing what counts as human knowledge. Only a view which recognizes rhetoric as not only taxonomic and managerial, but also epistemic and heuristic offers the possibility of articulating what it is that writers--indeed any kind of communicator--do when they do it, and of knowing when we have done so.

NOTES

[1] As Gerald Graff has recently opined: What we ought to reply to [assertions that every theory or proposition is "always-already" encoded in a system of power] is not "No, you're wrong to maintain that all theories are a function of politics and power" but rather "Yes, you're right to maintain that all theories are a function of politics and power, but so what? What can that fact tell us about whether we should accept any theory or not? Your point is true as far as it goes but without specific consequences

theoretically, since the political motivations and effects of a theory of irrelevant to its truth" (Critical Inquiry, 9 [March 1983], 600).

2 These quotations from Sharon Crowley and Michael Fischer exemplify the epistemic stance toward truth and the purpose of rhetorical study:

Crowley: "[Truth] is a product of the human psyche, and not of external reality. . . . The art of rhetoric is not an art of presence, of seeking truth; it is, instead, an art of the use of language" (279; 284).

Fischer: "Reality is not some 'transcendental signified' that preexists and limits the 'freeplay' of literary discourse. It is rather a realm which is itself a kind of text or verbal invention" (740).

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